Elephant poaching in Mali was a rarity before January 2012, but the presence of heavily-armed Tuareg mercenaries returning from Libya’s civil war exacerbated, if it did not create the current crisis. After the collapse of government in Northern and Central Mali, separatist and jihadist groups were able to occupy vastly populated areas without hindrance.

At the same time elephant poaching has escalated across the country, fueled by conflict and international trafficking networks that capitalize on high ivory prices, mainly driven by Asian demand.

Cameroon’s Bouba Njida National Park had lost 650 elephants in the first two and half months of 2012, and with an estimated 550 individuals, the unprotected Mali desert herd was under serious threat.

Since 2007, the Mali Elephant Project (MEP) has brought together the diverse clans and ethnicities populating the elephant range to develop a model of community empowerment, whereby local people benefit from elephant conservation. Joint efforts have
Five gun amnesty events however, the dislocation created in food, none of the recruits market, as they are healthier average an additional 50% in cost the MEP around $100,000-120,000 per year. Ultimately all "eco-guardians" swelled to over 600, and during the first three years only 20 elephants were killed.

The livestock managed in central Mali, which is home to the most unusual, as the elephants make an annual circular migration over a vast, remote area of 32,000km². It is the longest such habitat, and move rapidly between "concentration areas" of important migration in the world. It is also beneficial for the whole community. Forests are protected the elephant range only lost six elephants during the 2012-13 conflict. This has improved the cooperation of local communities, reducing the rate of poaching by two thirds, and the MEP is supporting the government to create a dedicated anti-poaching unit.

Last year’s landmark Malian peace deal aimed to settle conflict with armed groups. In 2012 the number of community members killed in armed conflict rose by 60%, and the MEP’s anti-poaching team, the MEP was able to orchestrate a deal that would see the disarming, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-fighters into local communities in elephant range - for the area is the size of Switzerland to watch out for poachers, as well as import markets. The MEP is also a Tusk Trust project and receives funding from a range of donors including the UK Government’s Darwin Initiative, the International Conservation Fund, and the MINUSMA (the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali).

The Mali Elephant Project (MEP) is an initiative of WILD Foundation and the World Wilderness Congress. See more at www.wild.org/mali-elephants.

See also: Vance G. Martin is President of WILD Foundation, chairs the Wilderness Specialist Group of the World Commission on Protected Areas/ IUCN, and is International Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the UK Government’s Darwin Initiative, and works globally on issues that protect wild nature while finding ways for humans and nature to co-exist sustainably. She is a Conservation Adviser to WILD Foundation, a Research Associate of the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford, UK, and a Trustee of Tusk Trust.
The ivory poaching crisis has its roots mainly in increased demand in Asia, with about 70% of illegal ivory ultimately destined for China.

The latest crisis began in the early 2000s following indications that the ban might be lifted, which led to a surge in poaching around 2005-2006. The multi-billion dollar industry has attracted organized criminal networks and gangs that export the ivory from Africa.

Some suggest that poaching would be limited if a regulated supply of ivory could be made available from that gathered from the stockpiling of tusks from culls and natural deaths. A large one-off sale of legal ivory (taken from elephants that died naturally) to China in 2008 hoped to prevent poaching, by lowering prices and making the industry less profitable - but recent research shows how this plan backfired catastrophically. It reduced the stigma of ivory, thereby causing a dramatic increase in elephant killing, boosting demand and providing cover for the laundering of illegal ivory.

have been set up in the elephant range but the process has been slow and relatively ineffective. Non-fighters have purchased weaponry in hope of receiving public sector opportunities, while delays in the process have meant the number of numbers assembling at these sites has grown, fuelling conflict between ethnicities and militias.

It is unlikely that the Malian government can fully deliver upon expectations. If there are no alternatives available for disenchanted youth, recruitment and radicalization will retain their draw. Despite incentives, many are still reluctant to take up arms, suggesting the MEP alternative is viable.

In the Gourma region of Mali, MEP’s aim is to offer individuals a pragmatic alternative to terrorism. With multiple proven benefits, this model is by far the most cost-effective security and stability initiative available. Uniting clans and ethnicities around a common cause – improving livelihoods, reversing habitat degradation and restoring ecosystem resilience – stabilizes and empowers local communities and promotes reconciliation. As one eco-guard said, “spending days building fire-breaks together, sharing food around a fire at night, you realize everyone has the same problems.”

More Information
Website: http://www.wild.org/mali-elephants/